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FUNCTIONAL TURNOVER: AN EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT.(U)

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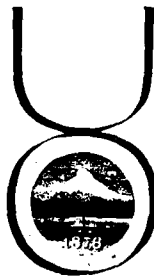
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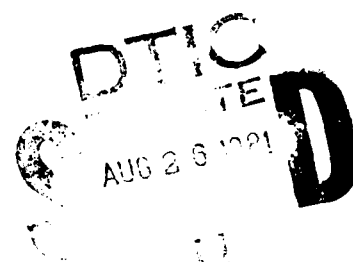
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Functional Turnover: An Empirical Assessment

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20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) It has been argued that the traditional method of categorizing employee turnover as "voluntary" or "involuntary" has the effect of overstating the gravity of turnover on the organization. A recently suggested taxonomy is used to identify the extent of "functional/dysfunctional" and "unavoidable/controllable" employee separations. The analysis of data on employees (N=1389) of Western bank branches which considers both the replaceability and quality of department employees indicates substantial levels of functional (71%) and unavoidable (52%) turnover. The results (continued)		

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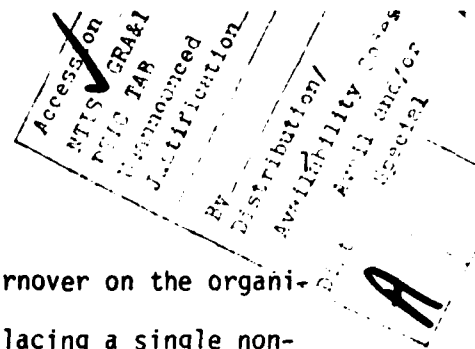
suggest that the traditional dichotomy may, in fact, substantially overstate the impact of voluntary turnover.

It would appear that the impact of employee turnover on the organization could hardly be overstated. The cost of replacing a single non-managerial employee has been estimated at over \$2500 (Mirvis & Lawler, 1977). Not surprisingly, a large effort has been dedicated to the investigation of the turnover phenomenon; it has been estimated that over 1000 studies and articles have appeared in print on this subject (Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Steers & Mowday, in press). These works have a common thread--turnover is a costly organizational problem and should be reduced (Staw, in press).

Recent work, however, has questioned the fundamental assumption that turnover is invariably dysfunctional to the organization (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Dalton & Todor, in press (a), (b); Jeswald, 1974; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980; Staw, in press; Staw & Oldham, 1978). Dalton (1981) has suggested that levels of turnover, whether viewed positively or negatively, are overstated. Inappropriate measurement and reporting practices may be factors which lead to a systematic overstatement of the impact of turnover on the organization.

Turnover Recategorized

Comparing the categories in Tables 1 and 2 illustrates a fundamental difference between the traditional model of turnover and a model which identifies "functional" turnover (Functional turnover is beneficial to the organization). Notice that in both tables, cells "A" and "B" are identical. It is in the classification of "voluntary" turnover that the essential difference lies. In the traditional taxonomy (Figure 1), the organization's evaluation of the departing employee is ignored. In the expanded taxonomy (Figure 2), however, the evaluation of the employee is crucial.



The expanded taxonomy (cells "C" and "D" of Table 2) includes two different kinds of "voluntary" turnover (Dalton, Todor & Krackhardt, in press).

Dysfunctional (cell C) - The individual wants to leave the organization but the organization prefers to retain the individual. This, of course, represents dysfunctional turnover; and,

Functional (cell D) - The individual wants to leave the organization, but the organization is unconcerned. The organization has a negative evaluation of the individual. This represents functional turnover--turnover decidedly beneficial to the organization.

Clearly, the effects of these employee separations on the organization would be quite different. The fundamental point is that to combine the cases in the lower cells of Table 2 would have the effect of overstating the gravity of turnover on the organization. The benefits of functional turnover are disregarded. Of course, functional turnover is not without its costs to the organization. Recruitment, training, and a portion of the administrative overhead still must be defrayed. Even so, functional turnover may be, in the balance, a positive phenomenon for the organization. Consequently, an important objective is to separate dysfunctional from functional turnover.

Another Concern: Unavoidable vs. Controllable Turnover

Recent reviews suggest that turnover research has been aimed primarily towards identifying the antecedents of voluntary turnover (Porter & Steers, 1973; Price, 1977; Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Mobley, Griffeth, Hand & Meglino, 1979). Presumably, such an identification may provide a means to reduce the incidence of turnover. However, if voluntary turnover is to be reduced, it must be under organizational control. Price (1977) persuasively argued that a primary reason for the reliance on voluntary turnover as a dependent variable is that it is more subject to

organizational control. Presumably, attempts to reduce any portion of voluntary turnover *not* subject to organizational control would be counter productive.

With respect to the expanded taxonomy (Figure 2), only cell C represents dysfunctional turnover. However, the total number of employees categorized in cell C does not necessarily represent turnover over which the organization has control. Employees who leave for education, family commitments, and health matters, for example, are not ordinarily subject to such control. If an aim of the organization is to reduce turnover, then the inclusion of such separations in its turnover reporting is misleading. For the theorist, this problem may provide a rationale for the relatively low associations between turnover and its suspected correlates. It may be that when using "voluntary" turnover as a dependent variable, we do not have a homogeneous subset.

Objectives

This research, then, addresses two questions with respect to voluntary turnover:

- 1) Is the functional portion of voluntary turnover sufficiently large to warrant separate identification?
- and
- 2) What portion of dysfunctional turnover is essentially unavoidable?

METHOD

Termination records were collected on bank tellers (N=1389) at 190 bank branches for a seven month period. The immediate supervisor of each departing employee was required by the bank to complete termination forms

from which it was determined whether the employee left voluntarily or was dismissed. In addition, the supervisor was asked to fill out a form on each teller which included the following items:

1. Would you rehire this person to work for you?
 - a. I would definitely hire this person to work for me again.
 - b. I would slightly prefer to hire this person (rather than someone else) to work for me again.
 - c. I am indifferent as to whether this person ever works for me again.
 - d. I would prefer to hire someone else to work for me.
 - e. Under no circumstances would I hire this person to work for me again.
2. How would you rate this person's performance as a teller while he or she was working for you?
 - a. Inadequate; clearly failed to meet minimum job requirements.
 - b. Generally adequate; met most job requirements; however, required close supervision.
 - c. Competent; met all requirements; required only minimal supervision.
 - d. High quality work; exceeded most requirements; made a valuable contribution and showed initiative.
 - e. Exceptional; consistently demonstrated outstanding performance.
3. In general, how easy would it be to find someone who would do as good a job as this person did?
 - a. Very easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Somewhat difficult
 - d. Very difficult

This information was then collapsed into two dichotomous metrics to represent the organization's evaluation of the departing employee (Dalton, et. al., in press):

Quality of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that s/he would prefer to hire someone else (responses "d" or "e") in question 1; OR if the supervisor rated the employee as "inadequate" on question 2, then the employee was considered low quality. Otherwise, the employee was considered acceptable or high quality.

Replaceability of Employee. If the supervisor indicated that an employee would be at least "somewhat easy" to replace (question 3, "a" or "b"), then the employee was considered easily replaced. Any other responses were interpreted to mean that the employee would be "difficult" to replace.

Employees were then placed into one of the four cells suggested by Tables 2 and 3. Inasmuch as there were two independent evaluative measures ("quality" and "replaceability" of employee), separate frequency tables were formed each representing a different concept of employee evaluation. Also, individual separation forms were examined to identify the reason for the voluntary terminations (e.g., retirement, health, family commitment, job abandonment) to determine which separations were under organizational control.

RESULTS

Extent of Functional Turnover

Table 1 represents the traditional categorization separating involuntary from voluntary turnover. Focusing on voluntary turnover as the "problem," the organization was experiencing a 32% turnover rate. This is a high percentage. The concern for such a turnover rate was, in fact, the primary reason that the sample organization granted permission for this research effort.

By dividing the "quit" category into dysfunctional and functional components, the turnover rate is greatly reduced. As indicated in Table 2, the proportion of turnover that involved valuable or at least acceptable employees is reduced to only 18%. If employees are evaluated by replaceability (Table 3), an arguably more relevant criterion, the dysfunctional turnover figure is less than 9%.

There are two points which should be noted. First, 9% or 18% turnover rates are not trivial; depending on the circumstances, such a rate could be disastrous. We would argue, however, that, *ceteris paribus*, both 9% and 18% turnover rates are of less concern than the original 32%. Second, 42% of the voluntary turnover was actually *beneficial* to the organization by the "quality" standard; 185 people voluntarily left over the

period who were not recommended for rehire and/or were evaluated as inadequate (clearly failed to meet minimum job requirements). These "quits" represent functional turnover for the organization. By the "replaceability" standard, the results are somewhat more impressive: 314 employees (71% of the total voluntary turnover) left the organization over the test period who were evaluated as "easy to replace."

Unavoidable Turnover and Organizational Control

It has been suggested that organizational resources committed to reduce unavoidable turnover is money unwisely spent. Table 4 illustrates the extent to which this aspect of control confuses the reporting of organizational turnover.

(Insert Table 4 About Here)

As indicated in Table 4, there are substantial portions of both dysfunctional and functional turnover which are essentially unavoidable. Importantly, the unavoidable categories (i.e., temporary, summer, education, health, family commitment, personal, job abandonment) are provided by the management of the sample organization. Simply, no reasonable intervention would have prevented these separations.

In the case of functional turnover, these unavoidable separations are of little consequence. Frankly, it can be argued that it really does not matter why these individuals left; they are not valued by the organization in any case. With dysfunctional turnover, however, the unavoidable category is of marked importance. If an essential thrust of turnover research involves its reduction, the unavoidable category should be identified. This is particularly true if, as in this case, unavoidable separations amount to 45% or 52% ("quality" or "replaceability") of total dysfunctional turnover.

The "avoidable/controllable" turnover dichotomy should be viewed with some caution. There is no particular reason to believe that employees accurately report their reasons for leaving. Certainly, in some cases it would be easier for employees to say that they were leaving to return to school, for example, when in fact they simply do not like the job. Also, employees may not wish to "burn their bridges" behind them. Obviously, "reasons for leaving" stated without care may result in a recommendation not to rehire. While the "avoidable" category seems large, it may be somewhat overstated.

DISCUSSION

The invariably negative implications of turnover on the organization have recently been criticized (Dalton & Todor, 1979; Dalton & Todor, in press (a), (b); Muchinsky & Tuttle, 1979; Muchinsky & Morrow, in press; Staw, in press; Staw & Oldham, 1978). Whether a more positive or the traditional view of turnover is taken may be largely function of its measurement. The usual "voluntary/involuntary" dichotomization of turnover may be necessary, but insufficient, to evaluate turnover in its proper perspective. Perhaps by recognizing that turnover may be subject to dysfunctional and functional categorizations and appreciating that certain turnover is, for practical purposes, unavoidable, a more responsible estimate of the impact of turnover on the organization may be determined.

As indicated in the Table 5 compendium, whether relying on a "quality" or "replaceability" criterion, the amount of functional turnover is substantive. This summarization also suggests that the avoidable/controlable dichotomy is a meaningful one. Approximately half of the cases of dysfunctional turnover by either criterion were not avoidable; i.e.

no reasonable intervention by the organization would have prevented the employee separations.

(Insert Table 5 About Here)

The shaded portions of Table 5 represent dysfunctional turnover which is potentially controllable by the organization. These sections identify personnel who the organization prefers to retain. Also, organizational intervention may actually reduce the incidence of this turnover. Compare the amounts of controllable, dysfunctional turnover with the total voluntary turnover: 31.7% vs 10.0% by "quality"; 31.7% vs 4.3% by "replaceability." That may be testimony for overstatement, or at least misunderstanding, of the "voluntary" category.

The contributions of the expanded taxonomy are threefold. First, categorizing voluntary turnover in the manner endorsed by this research may lead to a more realistic portrayal of the impact of turnover on the organization. A program to reduce turnover may be actually shortsighted for organizations with relatively large portions of functional and/or unavoidable turnover. Arguably, functional turnover should not be reduced. Moreover, to commit organizational resources to reduce turnover which is essentially unavoidable is futile.

Second, as previously noted, the expanded taxonomy may provide a partial explanation for the ordinarily low associations between voluntary turnover and its suspected antecedents and determinants. Perhaps the correlates of functional and dysfunctional turnover are not the same; the "voluntary" categorization may not be homogeneous. This is especially bothersome inasmuch as Price (1977) noted that one of the primary reasons that researchers have relied on the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy is to assure homogeneity.

Lastly, individuals categorized as functional or dysfunctional separations may be predictably different from one another. They may, for example, respond to different types of intervention. To the extent that these individuals are dissimilar, organizations may be able to minimize dysfunctional without artificially suppressing functional turnover.

We can agree with Porter and Steers (1973) that our understanding of the manner in which actual withdrawal decisions are made is far from complete. Perhaps the expanded taxonomy may add to a somewhat better understanding.

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Table 1

TRADITIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF TURNOVER
(7 Month Period)
Organization's Evaluation
of Individual

INDIVIDUAL'S EVALUATION
OF ORGANIZATION

No initiation of
voluntary turnover

Initiation of
voluntary turnover

<p>A employee remains n=856 (61.6%)</p>	<p>B employee fired n=92 (6.6%)</p>
<p>C Employee Quits n=441 (31.7%)</p>	

TOTAL N=1389
(100%)

Table 2

DYSFUNCTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF
TURNOVER BY QUALITY OF EMPLOYEE
(7 Month Period)

high quality
employee
+

low quality
employee
-

INDIVIDUAL'S EVALUATION
OF ORGANIZATION

No initiation of
voluntary turnover

Initiation of
voluntary turnover

<p>A employee remains n=856 (61.6%)</p>	<p>B employee fired n=92 (6.6%)</p>
<p>C employee quits Dysfunctional Turnover n=256 (18.4%)</p>	<p>D employee quits Functional Turnover n=185 (13.3%)</p>

TOTAL N=1389
(100%)

Table 3

DYSFUNCTIONAL/FUNCTIONAL CLASSIFICATION OF
TURNOVER BY REPLACEABILITY OF EMPLOYEE
(7 Month Period)

		not easily replaced +	easily replaced -
INDIVIDUAL'S EVALUATION OF ORGANIZATION	No initiation of voluntary turnover	A employee remains n=856 (61.6%)	B employee fired n=92 (6.6%)
	Initiation of voluntary turnover	C employee quits Dysfunctional Turnover n=121 (8.8%)	D employee quits Functional Turnover n=314 (22.9%)

TOTAL N=1383
(100%)

Table 4
Unavoidable Turnover in Dysfunctional/Functional Classification

	BY QUALITY OF EMPLOYEE ^a		BY REPLACEABILITY OF EMPLOYEE ^b	
	Total Voluntary Turnover (N=441)		Total Voluntary Turnover (N=435)	
	Dysfunctional (N=256; 58.0%)	Functional (N=185; 42.0%)	Dysfunctional (N=121; 27.8%)	Functional (N=314; 72.2%)
less: <u>UNAVOIDABLE TURNOVER</u>				
Temporary	1	2	0	3
Summer	22	11	14	17
Education	30	18	12	36
Health	15	13	7	21
Family Commitment	37	20	23	34
Personal (undisclosed)	7	15	4	18
Job Abandonment	5	8	2	11
TOTAL UNAVOIDABLE SEPARATIONS	N=117 (45.7%)	N=87 (47.0%)	N=62 (51.2%)	N=140 (44.6%)
CONTROLLABLE SEPARATIONS	N=139 (54.2%)	N=98 (52.9%)	N=59 (48.7%)	N=174 (55.4%)

^a number of cases from Table 2

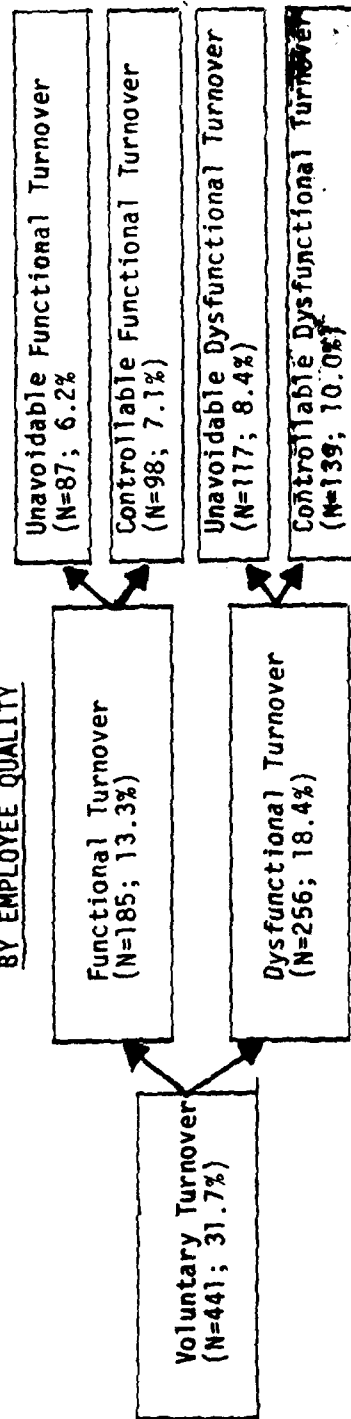
^b number of cases from Table 3

Table 5

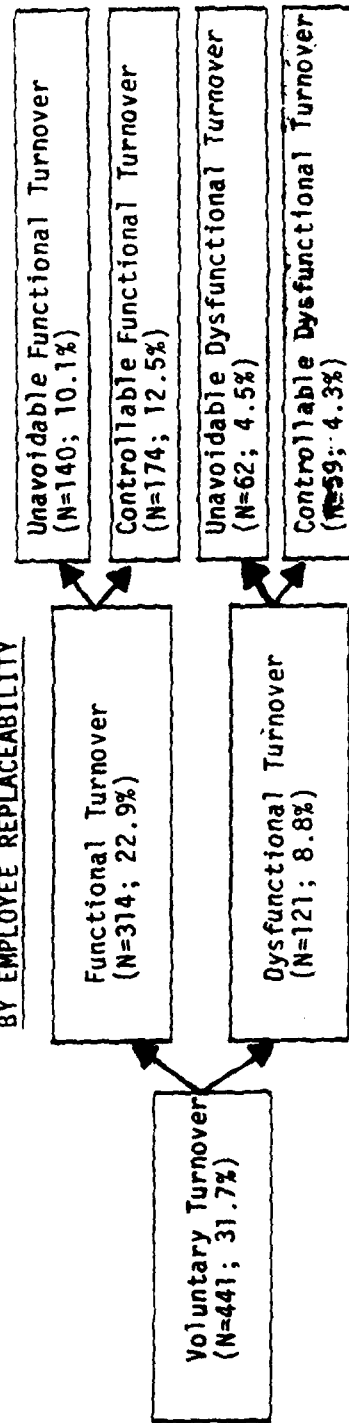
Summary of Effects:

Dysfunctional/Functional Categorization
with Unavoidable Separations

BY EMPLOYEE QUALITY



BY EMPLOYEE REPLACEABILITY



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FPO Seattle 98762

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LIST 8
NAVY MISCELLANEOUS

Naval Military Personnel Command (2 copies)
HRM Department (NMPC-6)
Washington, DC 20350

Naval Training Analysis
and Evaluation Group
Orlando, FL 32813

Commanding Officer
ATTN: TIC, Bldg. 2068
Naval Training Equipment Center
Orlando, FL 32813

Chief of Naval Education
and Training (N-5)
Director, Research Development,
Test and Evaluation
Naval Air Station
Pensacola, FL 32508

Chief of Naval Technical Training
ATTN: Dr. Norman Kerr, Code 017
NAS Memphis (75)
Millington, TN 38054

Navy Recruiting Command
Head, Research and Analysis Branch
Code 434, Room 8001
801 North Randolph Street
Arlington, VA 22203

Commanding Officer
USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70)
Newport News Shipbuilding &
Drydock Company
Newport News, VA 23607

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LIST 9
USMC

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Washington, DC 20380

Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps
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Washington, DC 20380

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Education Center (E031)
MCDEC
Quantico, VA 22134

Commanding Officer
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Commanding Officer
U.S. Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Quantico, VA 22134

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LIST 10
DARPA

Defense Advanced Research (3 copies)
Projects Agency
Director, Cybernetics
Technology Office
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Arlington, VA 22209

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International Public Policy
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McLean, VA 22101

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LIST 11
OTHER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

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Dr. Brian Usilaner
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Washington, DC 20548

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EOLC/SMO
1200 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20208

National Institute of Mental Health
Division of Extramural Research Programs
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20852

National Institute of Mental Health
Minority Group Mental Health Programs
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Office of Personnel Management
Office of Planning and Evaluation
Research Management Division
1900 E Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20415

Office of Personnel Management
ATTN: Ms. Carolyn Burstein
1900 E Street, NW.
Washington, DC 20415

Office of Personnel Management
ATTN: Mr. Jeff Kane
Personnel R&D Center
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Washington, DC 20593

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LIST 11 CONT'D

OTHER FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Social and Developmental Psychology
Program
National Science Foundation
Washington, DC 20550

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LIST 12
ARMY

Headquarters, FORSCOM
ATTN: AFPR-HR
Ft. McPherson, GA 30330

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LIST 13
AIR FORCE

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LIST 14
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Washington, DC 20036

British Embassy
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Canadian Defense Liaison Staff,
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Commandant, Royal Military
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LIST 15 (Continued)

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LIST 15 (Continued)

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24 June 1981

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24 June 1981

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